Rise of Gangsterism in Politics

K Balagopal

When hoodlums and their gang fights become integral part of ruling class politics, one of the consequences is the gradual demise of the institutions of bourgeois democracy. *What little vitality or democracy these institutions ever had in this country is being drained out by the rise of gangsterism in politics. The law, the courts, the press and the administration — all are being subjected to this destruction.*

One does not go to a convention against fascism to get hold of a definitive analysis of fascism. One goes there to see what fascism means and does to people of different modes of existence, and how — and how effectively — they are resisting it. By linking up these different pictures an integrated view of the emerging fascist trends can be had, which is about as much as one can scientifically hope to have right now, for in a situation where the resistance to fascism is way behind the evil, any claim to more than a working theory of it would be epistemologically suspect.

The anti-fascist convention held at Trichur in Kerala on January 14 and 15, attended by delegates from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and West Bengal, served this purpose rather well, given all the limitations inherent to our cultural and political history and geography. To speak only of the geography, Kerala — which ranks high in the export of working people to other states and countries — is poorly served by the communications infrastructure of the Indian railways: one has to run around a lot of irrelevant territory to reach the state (to give a striking illustration, the journey from Warangal to Trivandrum takes as much time as that from New Delhi to Warangal). Indian capital — for all its pretensions to entrepreneurship and protestations of suppression at the hands of socialist ideology — has no use for this munificently offered labour power, which therefore ends up supplying and washing dishes in tea-shops. And since the petty-commodity service sector is not influential enough to affect the capital expenditure of the government of

India, it will always remain difficult and tiresome to get in or out of Kerala, though hundreds and thousands of people keep doing so every day.

LATEST MASS-GOD

And as if this limitation of political geography is not enough, in this season the journey is made even more tiresome by the rush of black-clothed and ritually unkempt-looking pilgrims going to Sabarimalai, the resort of Ayyappa, the latest mass-god of Hinduism, who nevertheless shares with the earliest the attribute of a dubious parentage. The myth of his parentage is typical of Siva-Vishnu syncretism, but that syncretism cannot explain the sudden popularity of the god in late twentieth century south India, where neither *Saivism* nor *Vaishnavism* is of any sociological consequence, though cults of both the sects abound. The reasons are more modern, and both the reasons for the popularity and the changes the cult has undergone in recent years are of relevance to our concern with fascism. The cult — at least in Andhra — first attracted individual maverick elements of the urban lower middle classes/backward communities, and exclusively men at that. There was no ritual but only the putting on of black clothes, beads around the neck, unkempt beards and bare feet. Individually, most of the converts were of the problem-type: the type who have and give problems wherever they are. They would say on questioning that they have found solace and the problems are sorting themselves out — though there are no reported miracles — after taking the *deeksha*, which entails the foregoing apparel and the shunning of drink and sex, culminating in a final visit to Sabarimalai around *Makarasankramanam* time. But solace — as a psychological consequence of faith — explains nothing, for they need not have turned to a new god for that: they could have had their pick of a variety of established and organised cults. Temples to *Brahminised* deities — Rama, Siva and Vishnu in the form of *amsas* like Venkateswara — abound all over the state, and so do the cults of the more 'popular' Anjaneya and the preponderantly autochthonous mother-goddesses. And the cults range all the way not only along the Brahminical-autochthonous spectrum, but also along the private-mass spectrum.

While discourses on *Upanishadic* introspection can be heard in some temple or the other on any day, at the other end, the mother-goddess cults are wild enough to appeal to those sociologists who find it possible to describe the masses in their collectivity as mobs and herds. And so the reason for the spread of the Ayyappa cult goes beyond personal psychological needs.

The lower middle class of the overwhelmingly tertiary sector economy of urban India is a substantial and growing class. In all the states, it is the tertiary sector whose

share in the regional product is increasing. But given the essentially perverse and even then stunted nature of this development, the class, for all its growth, is unsure and insecure. It carries with it a strong sense of alienation, oppression and frustration. This oppression is not a private feeling that could seek relief in familiar cults, but a *class* phenomenon: oppression by the system and alienation *from* the system; the frustration therefore must necessarily find its outlet in something that is outside the establishment, preferably even anti-establishment, at least in its symbols and its idiom. The art forms they patronise, the magazines they read, the street gangs they join, the mafias they support and the cults they are attracted to are all at the fringe of or outside the establishment.

APPROPRIATION OF CULTS

Yet, it is possible to be 'outside' the establishment only in a metaphorical sense, in the sense of being outside the normative standards proclaimed by the establishment; in a real sense it is no more possible to be outside the system than it is possible to live outside the universe. There is no space outside a totality; that is an ontological maxim. You may resist its norms, you may even resist its philosophical idiom, or you may only resist its control, but there is no running away from it. And even if individuals sometimes cheat themselves into believing the contrary, the establishment knows this very well. And what it does to phenomena — the gangs, the media, the cults and the movements — that are 'outside' the establishment is to suppress them/profit from them/co-opt them. The first becomes necessary only in the case of self-consciously anti-establishment phenomena; for vague and undirected frustrations the second and the third are more sensible reactions. And it is a historical characteristic of the Indian State and society that it is eminently adept at such sensible stratagems, an ability that is extremely relevant when we are discussing fascism. And thus the Ayyappa cult, which first attracted (in Andhra, at any rate) the frustrated elements among the lower middle classes, because — even though it borrows some myths and symbols from Brahminism — it is recognisably outside the Brahminical cultural establishment, which in turn is itself an integral element of the Indian State's ideological establishment, quickly gets integrated into that very system.

From being the eccentricity of maverick problem-youth, it first becomes the religion of the whole family, and then an acceptable religion for a whole class. Women too take to this hitherto all-male cult, and the elderly parents who earlier grumbled about the train fare to Kottayam now put on black clothes and go along with the youth. And the middle and upper middle classes pick up the cult, so that the black robes begin

to lose their dirty look and acquire a black or deep blue sheen. Parallelly, the Brahmins devise a new ritual for the Sabarimalai trip. Hitherto, it was merely a question of buying a ticket and getting into the train; now the wife and husband have to submit to an elaborate seeing-off ritual complete with Brahmins chanting seemingly vedic mantras into which supplications to the latest god have been miraculously woven. In a couple of years the cult will either die out of sheer boredom or will become as acceptable as that of the *Lord of the Seven Hills*, and the social misfits of the urban *mohallas* will have to seek a new god and a new cult.

Either of the ends would be peaceful, but in a different situation and a different context, a not altogether peaceful assimilation could be imagined: given, say, a preponderance of Muslims or Sikhs and the kind of volatile conditions created by the Ayodhya controversy or the murder of Indira Gandhi, it is easy to imagine the arming of the Ayyappa devotees — each one of them is an *amsa* of the lord, it is to be remembered with the *trisul* and the chakra of the lord's syncretic parents — and of course, more serviceable weapons for practical use — and their setting out to save the very same Hindu dharma which would not allow most of these devotees even a decent rebirth in the normal course of things.

HOODLUMS, LEGISLATORS, MARTYRS

But the utility of lower middle class misfits to fascism does not end with the appropriation of their cults for communal purposes. Each one of the modes of expression of the frustration can be appropriated and put to use. The establishment press can itself turn yellow, a hesitant shade at first and a deeper tint soon as confidence grows; the establishment art and literature can itself turn *lumpen* and violate all the canons of artistic values, social responsibility and personal morality proclaimed by the establishment itself; and finally the street gangs can be appropriated and adorned with the hallowed symbols of parliamentary democracy: hoodlums become legislators, their gang fights become political battles, their murder becomes national news, and in their death they become martyrs in the cause of socialism, national integrity or Telugu pride. This dimension of the problem of fascism, which was lightly touched upon by the speakers at the Trichur convention, is well illustrated by recent happenings in Andhra.

Vangaveeti Mohana Ranga Rao (Ranga, for short) begins his life in a communist taxi-drivers' union; there is an unverified rumour that at one point he was even inspired by the call of *Naxalbari*. But soon he turns into a hoodlum under the leadership of his elder brother, the late Radha (the full name was Radhakrishna). The gang soon splits into two, one under the leadership of the Vangaveeti brothers and the other

under the leadership of the Devineni brothers, Gandhi and Nehru (as their hopeful parents named them: Gandhi was murdered some years ago and Nehru is now in jail on charge of having got Ranga murdered). The influx into Vijayawada of agrarian wealth and the profits from agro-based processing and trade, which finds no better outlet than real estate and finance, offers a fecund basis for such hoodlums: the murky underworld of shady real estate and finance deals is second only to bootlegging and smuggling as a base for the operation of mafias.

This much is nothing out of the way, and of not much significance in a discussion on fascism. But soon the crisis in the politics of the ruling classes intervenes. A precondition for the viability of *bourgeois* democratic forms of governance is that the ruling classes should be able to settle their problems amicably, and that they should be able to convince the masses to submit to oppression with good humour. When either of them — or both, as in India now — breaks down, fascist forms of governance take over. Street gangs then acquire political significance. With the emergence of the *Telugu Desam Party* — signifying the break-down of amity among the ruling classes — the hoodlums of Vijayawada become political leaders. Ranga becomes a *Congress(I)* MLA and Nehru becomes a *Telugu Desam* MLA. Their mutual killings thereafter become serious affairs. When Murali, a younger brother of the Devineni faction, is axed to death — along with four followers of the faction — at the time of the elections to the co-operative societies last year, the TDP goes on a rampage — minor, compared to what the Congress did this time — on the streets of Vijayawada. Ranga is accused of having planned the murder, and spends some weeks in jail While in jail he realises that it could well be his turn next (a fact which none of his ostentatious mourners would like to admit today), and realises further that being a *Congress(I)* legislator is not enough security. None of the Andhra Congress leaders who are now making capital of his dubious martyrdom had ever entertained any feeling other than of distrust and a version for him. They themselves lacked anything resembling a mass base, and they distrusted this hoodlum's image as a rebel. He could incite slum-dwellers to grab urban land, he could incite rickshaw-pullers against the traffic police, and he could protect the *lumpen proletariat* from the corrupt policemen — things which a Vengal Rao or a Rajasekhar Reddy, inhibited by their feudal past, or a Shiv Shanker, inhibited by his past as a high court judge, could not do with equal aplomb. And so Ranga decided while in jail that he would have to enlarge his mass base further and give it a greater colour of legitimacy. He chose the *Kapu* caste as the appropriate identity, for the caste — or rather the castes, for there are many castes which call themselves *Kapu* in the generic sense has a wide presence among the peasantry and urban lower middle classes all over the state; and the fact that there is a substantial *Kapu* landowning and business elite in the Krishna and more so the Godavari deltas, which would also find

the mobilisation in the name of the *Kapus* useful for the furtherance of their own interests, only helped him. He convened assemblies of the *Kapus* at many places in the Godavari and Krishna deltas; each of these *kapunadus* (*nadu* is an old dravidian word which denotes a territory as well as an assembly which is territorially — or even communally, as in this case — delimited) was attended by thousands of people, and soon other *Kapu* notables started identifying with it.

And yet he was killed. He and his gang were hounded by the *Telugu Desam*'s policemen until he felt really insecure, to the point of going on a hunger strike with the demand that he be given protection; his prayer was not only ignored, but he was attacked while on protest and murdered in a most brutal and dastardly fashion. And whoever may have been the actual perpetrators of the crime, it is difficult to believe that the top leaders of the *Telugu Desam Party* did not have prior knowledge — at the least — of it; the extraordinary amount of violence, that followed his killing is itself proof that the act could not have been done casually. The violence has been described as looting, plunder and caste-conflict by the press. But to closer observation, it contained many strands. A marked element was the class hatred that the vulgar new rich of coastal Andhra have brought in their wake; it was their exhibitionist wealth that was made the target of destruction. In the beginning, the rioters pointedly, destroyed the costliest and the most garish of the looted goods, and took home only the articles of common use. A second strand was the *anti-Kamma* violence to which both sides had equally contributed: NTR by visibly favouring the *Kamma* caste in the distribution of spoils, and the Congressmen by whipping up caste-hatred on this score. A third strand was the general eruption of popular frustration. And the last was the organised rioting engineered by Congressmen and Ranga's henchmen. It is said that in one street of Vijayawada alone — named after Annie Besant — about Rs 100 crore worth of property was looted or destroyed; but then how many streets exist in the towns of this country wherein a few hours' rioting can destroy or despoil property and goods worth Rs 100 crore? It is meaningless to indulge in moral horror exclusively at those forms of plunder that are prohibited by the Indian Penal Code.

But — to get back to the theme of fascism — when hoodlums and their gang fights become an integral part of ruling class politics, the consequences for the people go well beyond a few days' rioting. All of the consequences need not be charted out, but there is one dimension that must be commented upon, and that is the gradual demise of every one of the institutions of *bourgeois democracy*. These institutions have never been particularly strong or democratic in our country, but what little vitality or democracy they ever had is being drained out parallelly with the rise of gangsterism in politics. The law, the courts, the press and the administration, are all being subjected to this destruction.

This destruction attracted a lot of attention at the Trichur convention. Indeed, the 59th Amendment to the Constitution, which restores to the emergency provision its original attribute of being a lethal hatchet of formal democracy, an attribute which had been softened earlier under the pressure of the revulsion that the internal Emergency promulgated by Indira Gandhi had given rise to, was the figurative sub-title of the theme of the convention.

But a hatchet is not the best weapon for the use of judicious force, and so a number of other legislative enactments and amendments have been brought forward in recent times to curb the formal rights available to industrial workers, white-collar employees, press people and of course political activists. Indeed, the decade of the eighties has been punctuated by such enactments: three amendments to the National Security Act, extension of the Suppression of Disturbances Act and the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act to Punjab, the Terrorist Affected Areas (Special Courts) Act, the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, the Trade Unions and Industrial Disputes (Amendment) Bill, the Hospitals and Other Institutions (Redressal of Grievances) Bill, the Defamation Bill, the Postal Bill, etc. It may be thought that such 'black laws' have never been required to suppress the people, and therefore, as a corollary, that an anti-fascist movement need not bother too much about such legal fictions: after all, it required no Act for the Suppression of Seditious Cultural Activities to murder Safdar Hashmi, nor the enactment of the Defamation Bill to murder Umesh Dhobal or Pingali Dasaratharam. But that is a superficial way of looking at things: one obvious reason is that the rights that are formally taken away by these enactments are not inconsequential paper statutes, but the fruits of hard-won victories. Secondly, the law is not merely a norm of social conduct supported by the sanction of the State apparatus; the law is also an *ideology*. To be lawful is not merely to conform to the norms written down in the law codes; to be lawful is to be right, proper, moral *just*. If the norms delimit lawful behaviour, then the ideological connotations of 'lawful behaviour' legitimises those norms, raise them to a level of righteousness well above the positivist meaning attached to the word norm in the formal sense. When the policeman catches somebody else on the wrong side of the road, you do not merely feel relieved that it was not you that was caught, you also feel righteous. It is this legitimacy that the State seeks when it enacts what we call 'black laws'. If Safdar Hashmi had been sentenced to life imprisonment under an Act for the Suppression of Seditious Cultural Activities (there is nothing fantastic about the notion: section 4 of TADA decrees a life sentence for anyone who merely propagates or prophesizes that a region of India is going to cede or secede), then not a tenth of these tears would have been shed for him, and that is what makes such enactments dangerous. And that is why, even as we may like to campaign against death sentences as a matter of principle,

it is necessary and right to keep saying again and again that Kehar Singh's execution was a terribly unfair act even under existing rules and traditions of criminal trials. Even as our central task is to fight the real violation of real rights, a critique of and a struggle against the formal violation of formal rights is also important. The rights have got formal recognition in the law only because they have real recognition in the hearts of the masses, and therefore to rule the masses without recognising the rights would be impossible. And equally, when it becomes necessary to violate the rights, it is preferable to enact the violation as formal laws, so that the legitimacy that attaches to law *as such will* give whatever justification that is possible for the violation.

A third dimension, which was discussed perhaps more extensively than the first two, is the political-social-economic background to developing fascism. There is no need to describe in detail all the problems that the ruling classes are facing, nor the fact that they are unable to find a satisfactory solution to any of them. What is relevant is that the solutions they are attempting — like 'liberalisation' of the economy, and patchwork accords for political crises — are of such nature as to be incompatible with the minimum respect for the people's rights. And so each one of the hard-won rights of the people is being taken away both statutorily and by extra-legal suppression. In the so-called 'high-wage island' big industry, there is not only the ongoing retrenchment in the name of rationalisation, but there is also a growing tendency to contract out a substantial part of the work, so that many big industrial units — both in the public sector and the private sector — undertake the manufacture of only the core of the product and get everything else done on contract by private contracting units, which use low-paid labour — often that of women and children — for the purpose. The white-collar middle class faces a restricted employment situation both in the industrial sphere and in the administrative sphere. If this is the situation faced by the most advanced sections of the people, the condition of the others needs no elaboration. Any resistance from the masses must therefore be suppressed brutally. The currently pending bills restricting the right of association and collective struggle of industrial workers and white-collar employees, is only the formal tip of the iceberg. Underneath is hidden the monster of brute force, symbolised by the machine-gun toting policeman who is visible all over the country today.

The only hope is the resistance that the people have been expressing time and again, ana their capacity for not only uncontrolled outbursts but also disciplined and organised protest, the kind of discipline and dedication that was very much in evidence in the organisation of the Trichur convention. It would be cheating oneself to believe that the resistance is strong enough to overcome the fascist onslaught; but then it is only by courageously facing the onslaught that resistance can strengthen itself.